

Chapter I

The Antiquity and Continuity of the Belief that Hinduism Is Not a Missionary Religion

I

From the earliest times, the Hindus have appeared to outside observers as a non-missionary people, that is, a people not interested in converting others to their religion. The earliest record of the contact of the Hindus with people outside India pertains to the Persians, as indicated by an examination of the Avestan and Vedic material.¹ The evidence does not suggest any missionary effort directed toward the Persians by the Vedic Hindus.² On the contrary, if there was any proselytizing going on, it was on the part of the Zoroastrians in relation to followers of the pre-Zoroastrian forms of religion,³ which bore some affinity to Vedism.⁴

The Persians invaded India in the sixth century BC, and because of this event, the relation between the Zoroastrians and the Hindus becomes clearer.⁵ Again, there is no suggestion that this forced contact led to any missionary activity on the part of the Hindus, even though an Indian contingent fought alongside the Persians in Greece.⁶ There is, on the other hand, some evidence of Zoroastrian proselytizing activity.⁷

The Macedonian invasion of India in the fourth century BC provides the next point of contact between the Hindus and the non-Hindus beyond India—this time with the Greeks. Again, any evidence of missionary activity on the part of the Hindus is lacking. But two incidents associated with Alexander's campaign seem to foreshadow emerging patterns of the relationship between the Hindus and the non-Hindus. The first incident consists of what is generally regarded as the earliest recorded account of the rite of *Sati*. When the leader of

an Indian contingent with the Greeks died in Persia 316 BC, his two wives vied with each other in wanting to immolate themselves. The elder one, who was pregnant, was prevented from doing so, but the younger one was allowed to proceed with her resolve.

The elder wife went away lamenting, with the band about her head rent, and tearing her hair, as if tidings of some great disaster had been brought her; and the other departed, exultant at her victory, to the pyre, crowned with fillets by the women who belonged to her and decked out splendidly as for a wedding she was escorted by her kinsfolk who chanted a song in praise of her virtue. When she came near to the pyre, she took off her adornments and distributed them to her familiars and friends, leaving a memorial of herself, as it were, to those who had loved her. Her adornments consisted of a multitude of rings on her hands, set with precious gems of diverse colours, about her head, golden stars about her head, not a few, variegated with different sorts of stones, and about her neck a multitude of necklaces, each a little larger than the one above it. In conclusion, she said farewell to her familiars and was helped by her brother onto the pyre, and there, to the admiration of the crowd, which had gathered together for the spectacle, she ended her life in heroic fashion. Before the pyre was kindled, the whole army in battle array marched round it thrice. She meanwhile lay down beside her husband, and as the fire seized her no sound of weakness escaped her lips. The spectators were moved, some to pity and some to exuberant praise. But some of the Greeks present found fault with such customs as savage and inhumane.⁸

We learn toward the end that the spectators “were moved, some to pity, some to exuberant praise.” It is not clear whether the spectators referred to here are only Indians; it is likely that they included Persians and Greeks—and, if so, then some of them may have been moved to exuberant praise as well. But we are also told that some of the Greeks condemned the custom. It is unlikely, however, that, as a result of witnessing the rite of *Satī*, any Persian or Greek may have decided to convert to Hinduism. On the contrary.

The second incident, which may shed some light on the matter, is Alexander’s encounter with the gymnosophists, especially with their leader Dandamis.

King Alexander, accordingly, when he heard of all this, was desirous of learning the doctrines of the sect, and so he sent for this Dandamis, as being their teacher and president. . . .

Onesicritus was therefore dispatched to fetch him, and when he found the great sage he said: "Hail to thee, thou teacher of the Bragmanes. The son of the mighty god Zeus, King Alexander, who is the sovereign lord of all men, asks you to go to him, and if you comply, he will reward you with great and splendid gifts, but if you refuse will cut off your head."

Dandamis, with a complacent smile, heard him to the end, but did not so much as lift up his head from his couch of leaves, and while still retaining his recumbent attitude returned this scornful answer:—"God, the Supreme King, is never the author of insolent wrong, but is the creator of light, of peace, of life, of water, of the body of man, and of souls. He alone is the God of my homage, who abhors slaughter and instigates no wars. But Alexander is not God, since he must taste of death; and how can such as he be the world's master, who has not yet reached the further shore of the river Tiberaboas, and has not yet seated himself on a throne of universal dominion? . . . Know this, however, that what Alexander offers me, and the gifts he promises, are all things to me utterly useless; but the things I prize, and find of real use and worth, are these leaves which are my house, these blooming plants which supply me with dainty food, and the water which is my drink, while all other possessions and things, which are amassed with anxious care, are wont to prove ruinous to those who amass them, and cause only sorrow and vexation, with which every poor mortal is fully fraught. But as for me, I lie upon the forest leaves, and, having nothing which requires guarding, close my eyes in tranquil slumber; whereas had I gold to guard, that would banish sleep. The earth supplies me with everything, even as a mother her child with milk. I go wherever I please, and there are no cares with which I am forced to cumber myself, against my will. Should Alexander cut off my head, he cannot also destroy my soul. My head alone, now silent, will remain, but the soul will go away to its Master, leaving the body like a torn garment upon the earth, whence also it was taken. I then, becoming spirit,

shall ascend to my God, who enclosed us in flesh, and left us upon the earth to prove whether, when here below, we shall live obedient to his ordinances, and who will require of us, when we depart hence to his presence, an account of our life, since he is judge of all proud wrong-doing, for the groans of the oppressed become the punishments of the oppressors.

Let Alexander, then, terrify with these threats those who wish for gold and for wealth, and who dread death, for against us these weapons are both alike powerless, since the Bragmanes neither love gold nor fear death. Go, then, and tell Alexander this: 'Dandamis has no need of aught that is yours, and therefore will not go to you, but if you want anything from Dandamis come you to him.' " Alexander, on receiving from Onesicritus a report of the interview, felt a stronger desire than ever to see Dandamis, who, though old and naked, was the only antagonist in whom he, the conqueror of many nations, had found more than his match.⁹

It is clear from this account that Dandamis had no desire to convert Alexander. This attitude is confirmed by the experience of Onesicritus, who met fifteen renunciants near Taxila. Upon telling them that the Greek king wanted to learn of their wisdom, he received the following reply from one of them: "No one coming in the drapery of European clothes—cavalry cloak and broad-brimmed hat and top-boots, such as Macedonians wore—could learn their wisdom. To do that he must strip naked and learn to sit on the hot stones beside them."¹⁰ It was like asking Sir Winston Churchill to become a nakid fakir!

One should note that there is a willingness to impart instruction—but on one's own terms. But "you call us, we won't call you" is hardly an attitude consistent with a missionary spirit.

Further evidence from Greek sources only serves to confirm this view. Megasthenes is believed to have been the ambassador of Seleucus at the court of Candragupta Maurya, who founded the Mauryan Empire and ruled from circa 324–300 BC. His account of India is now lost, but it was freely drawn upon by later writers. The admittedly fragmentary evidence supplied by these references seems to confirm the overall picture. We are told that the Indians did not conquer lands beyond their borders: "A sense of justice, they say, prevented any Indian king from attempting conquest beyond the limits of India."¹¹ We are also told that "the Indian stands almost alone among the

nations in never having migrated from their own country.”¹² Because conquest and migration are two major ways in which a religion displays its missionary zeal—as illustrated by the history of Christianity and Islam—the presumption is strengthened that Hinduism was not a missionary religion, at least at the time.

II

After the Greek accounts, it is from the accounts of the Chinese travelers to India that we must determine whether Hinduism appeared to them to be missionary religion. Pre-eminent among the Chinese Buddhist monks, who visited India, are Faxian (Fa-hien), Xuanzang (Hiuen Tsang), and Yijing (I-tsing). Faxian traveled to India and Śrī Laṅkā between 399–414 AD, during the reign of the Gupta monarch Candragupta II Vikramāditya, though he does not mention the king by name.¹³ The account left by him basically consists of Buddhist curiosities, but a few observations pertaining to Hinduism can be found scattered through the work. Faxian even mentions a region that may be seen as falling outside the pale of both Buddhism and Hinduism. He remarks, while describing the Deccan:

At a very long distance from the hill there are villages, where the people all have bad and erroneous views, and do not know the Śramaṇas of the Law of Buddha, Brāhmaṇas, or (devotees of) any of the other and different schools. The people of that country are constantly seeing men on the wing, who come and enter this monastery. On one occasion, when devotees of various countries came to perform their worship at it, the people of those villages said to them, ‘Why do you not fly? The devotees whom we have seen hereabouts all fly’; and the strangers answered, on the spur of the moment, ‘our wings are not yet fully formed.’¹⁴

Faxian, however, makes no mention of either Buddhist or Hindu missionary activity taking place in the region.

Faxian’s account testifies to the cordial relations between the Hindus and the Buddhists. He states at one point in his description of central India that, after the Buddha’s *mahāparinirvāṇa*, “the kings and the heads of the Vaiśyas built vihāras for the priests and endowed them” and that these endowments were “engraved on plates of metal, so that afterwards they were handed down from king to king, without

anyone daring to annul them, and they remain even to the present true."¹⁵ While speaking of his own time he says: "When the monks have done receiving their annual tribute (from the harvests), the Heads of the Vaiśyas and all the Brahmans bring clothes and such other articles as the monks require for use, and distribute among them."¹⁶

Faxian, in the course of describing life in Magadha or modern Bihar, states that there resided in Pāṭaliputra (modern Patna) "a great Brahman, named Rādha-sāmi, a professor of the *mahāyāna*, of clear discernment and much wisdom. . . . He might be more than fifty years old, and all the kingdom looked up to him."¹⁷ He also mentions "a Brahman teacher, whose name was Mañjuśrī," residing in another monastery "whom the Shamans of greatest virtue in the kingdom, and the mahāyāna Bhikshus honour and look up to."¹⁸ It is noteworthy that these teachers were Brahmins. Faxian further states that, when the procession of images is celebrated "on the eighth day of the second month," images of the Buddha are included in the procession and ". . . the Brahmans come and invite the Buddhas to enter the city on that day."¹⁹

Any missionary activity on the part of the Hindus to reconvert the Buddhists seems inconsistent with this picture of amicable relations between the two.

On the other hand, it seems that the Hindu caste tabus were in operation in the Middle Kingdom, or *Madhya-deśa*. The *caṇḍālas* are mentioned by Faxian in a well-known passage, which contains a generally positive portrayal of the Middle Kingdom.

Throughout the whole country the people do not kill any living creature, nor drink intoxicating liquor, nor eat onions or garlic. The only exception is that of the Chandalas. That is the name for those who are (held to be) wicked men, and live apart from others. When they enter the gate of a city or a market-place, they strike a piece of wood to make themselves known, so that men know and avoid them, and do not come into contact with them. In that country they do not keep pigs and fowls, and do not sell live cattle; in the markets there are no butchers' shops and no dealers in intoxicating drink. In buying and selling commodities they use cowries. Only the Chandalas are fishermen and hunters, and sell flesh meat.²⁰

In the opinion of most scholars, because one can only be born²¹ into a caste (and not be converted to it), the outcastes imply the

existence of the caste-system, and the caste-system is inconsistent with proselytization—the implication seems to be that Hinduism was non-missionary.

When acts of charity are mentioned as being performed by Hindus, there is no suggestion that they were meant to attract converts.²² This seems to hold true for Śrī Laḥkā as well.²³

The next important Chinese traveler of note was Xuanzang²⁴ (Hiuen Tsang), whose travels in India extended from 629 to 645 AD. These “travels described in a work entitled *Records of the Western World*, which has been translated into French, English and German, is a treasure-house of accurate information indispensable to every student of antiquity, and has done more than any archaeological discovery to render possible the remarkable resuscitation of lost Indian history.”²⁵ Xuanzang visited India at a time during the reign of Harṣa,²⁶ whose empire is usually²⁷ (though perhaps erroneously)²⁸ regarded as the last great empire of ancient India. Harṣa did however rule over much of north India. This fact imparts to Xuanzang’s observation an added significance. Yet Xuanzang, while he does allude to Brahmanical opposition to Harṣa’s patronage of Buddhism at one point, does not allude to missionary activity on the part of the Hindus. (His evidence, however, is significant enough for us to take up in more detail after the account of his successor Yijing had been presented.)

The last of the great Chinese Buddhist pilgrims to India was Yijing (I-tsing, 635–713 AD).²⁹ He was a junior contemporary of Xuanzang and “may have witnessed the ‘noble enthusiasm of Hiuen Tsang’ and probably also the grand ceremony of his funeral carried out under the special direction of the emperor, for his death occurred during I-tsing’s stay in the capital,” at Ch’ang-an.³⁰ Yijing was primarily concerned with the state of the monastic order and monastic rules, to whose proper observances he attached prime importance,³¹ but whatever evidence can be gleaned from his account tends to confirm the impression that Hinduism must have appeared to him as a non-missionary religion. He states that the “teaching of the Buddha is becoming less prevalent in the world from day to day.”³² If this is not to be dismissed as an aside, then it should be noted that the geographical theater of the decline of Buddhism is global, not Indian, and further, that the paragraph ends with some measure of optimism: “it is to be hoped that we shall be more attentive in future.”³³ Presumably the reference is to the observance of the rules of the order whose nonobservance, it seems to be implied, was the cause of this decline. It is also possible that the purpose of the statement of the decline is to attract attention, as the passage is didactic in nature. In any case, in no way is the

alleged decline of Buddhism associated with Hindu missionary activity. Indeed, the translator comments that "there is no trace of Brahmanic hostility in our Record; this is in harmony with the dates of Kumārila Bhaṅṭa (about 750) and Śaṅkarācārya (about 788–820)."³⁴ A passage in the Record testified to the aloofness of the Brahmins, an attitude hardly consistent with a missionary spirit, although this aloofness is mentioned in the context of their relation to the other castes, as well as to their devotion to the cultivation of the Vedas:

The Brahmins are regarded throughout the five parts of India as the most honourable (caste). They do not, when they meet in a place, associate with the other three castes, and the mixed classes of the people have still less intercourse with them. The scriptures they revere are the four Vedas, containing about 100,000 verses; 'Veda' hitherto was wrongly transcribed by the Chinese characters 'Wei-t'o;' the meaning of the word is 'clear understanding' or 'knowledge.' The Vedas have been handed down from mouth to mouth, not transcribed on paper or leaves. In every generation there exist some intelligent Brahmins who can recite the 100,000 verses.³⁵

Moreover, two bits of evidence, somewhat contradictory in themselves, reinforce the same conclusion: that Hinduism was not missionary. On the one hand, Yijing observes about certain rules regarding dietic impurities that "this is the custom among both the rich and poor, and is not only a custom observed by us but even by the Brāhmins (Devas, gods)." The parenthetical gloss is a bit obscure, but if Brahmins are meant, then it is clear that Brāhmaṇas and Śramaṇas observed some rules in common, so that the divide between them is thereby reduced. On the other hand, one finds anticipations of an ethnocentric conceit on the part of Indians (Hindus?), which Albīrūnī (973–1048) was to excoriate in the eleventh century AD (though here too, as with Albīrūnī, it is balanced by the author's own self-regard!). The concerned passage runs as follows:

Besides India, there are countries of the Pārasas (Persians) and the Tajiks (generally taken as Arabs), who wear skin and trousers. In the country of the naked people (Nicobar Isles) they have no dress at all; men and women alike are all naked. From Kaśmīra to all the Mongolic countries such as Suli, Tibet, and the country of the Turkish tribes, *the customs resemble one another to a great extent; the*

people in these countries do not wear the covering-cloth (Skt. kambala), but use wool or skin as much as they can, and there is very little karpāsa (i.e. cotton), which we see sometimes worn. As these countries are cold, the people always wear shirt and trousers. Among these countries the Pārasas, the Naked People, the Tibetans, and the Turkish tribes have no Buddhist law, but the other countries had and have followed Buddhism; and in the districts where shirts and trousers are used the people are careless about personal cleanliness.

Therefore *the people* of the five parts of India are proud of their own purity and excellence. But high refinement, literary elegance, propriety, moderation, *ceremonies of welcoming and parting*, the delicious taste of food, and the richness of benevolence and righteousness are found in China only, and no other country can excel her. . . .³⁶

But whether it was cultural convergence between the Hindus and Buddhists within India, or the conceit of the Indians vis-à-vis foreigners, the implication of both for Hinduism being a missionary religion is obviously negative.

We revert now to a more detailed investigation of the evidence furnished by Xuanzang about the missionary, or otherwise, character of Hinduism during his visit to India. One salient feature of Xuanzang's account³⁷ is the fact that it shows Buddhism in decline. This is clear from his description of the various places he visited. On numerous occasions one encounters the remark: "adherents of the different non-Buddhist sects lived pell-mell,"³⁸ or a similar comment. It is even more significant that the Buddhists seemed to live in anticipation of the exhaustion of their own religion. Thus, we are told about a tope:

The Buddha predicted that when this tope had been seven times burned and seven times rebuilt, his religion would come to an end. The Records of former sages stated that the tope had already been erected and destroyed three times. When Yuan-Chuang arrived he found there has been another burning, and the work of rebuilding was still in progress.³⁹

The references to the dilapidated condition of many Buddhist structures and deserted Buddhist sites only confirms this general impression that Buddhism was on the decline and that the Buddhists seem to have been aware of it.

If the Buddhists were declining relatively to non-Buddhists, then one would expect some evidence of Hindu missionary activity as an element in the process. However, rather strikingly, references to cases of conversion to Buddhism abound! However, a close inspection reveals that, but for a few exceptions, the cases refer to conversion in the Buddha's lifetime or in the following centuries.⁴⁰ Cases of conversion during Xuanzang's lifetime to Buddhism are conspicuous by their absence, except in one particular case, that of Śīlabhadra. Xuanzang narrates the story about him as follows:

Śīlabhadra was a scion of the Brahminical royal family of Samataṭa (in East India); as a young man he was fond of learning and of exemplary principles. He traveled through India seeking the wise, and in Nālandā he met Dharmapāla P'usa who gave him instruction, and in due time ordained him as a bhikshu. Then Śīlabhadra rose to be eminent for his profound comprehension of the principles and subtleties of Buddhism, and his fame extended to foreign countries. A learned but proud and envious Brahmin of South India came to Magadha to have a discussion with Dharmapāla. Śīlabhadra, at the time the most eminent of the disciples of Dharmapāla, although only thirty years of age, proposed to meet the Brahmin in controversy, and the offer was accepted. At the discussion the Brahmin was utterly defeated, and the king to mark his appreciation of the victor's success wished to endow him with the revenues of a certain city. But Śīlabhadra declined the gift saying: "The scholar with dyed garments is satisfied with the requisites of his Order; leading a life of purity and continence what has he to do with a city?" The king, however, urged him to accept the reward; "The prince of religion has vanished" he said, "and the boat of wisdom has foundered; without public recognition there is nothing to stimulate disciples: for the advancement of Buddhism be graciously pleased to accept my offer." Then Śīlabhadra, unable to have his own way, accepted the city, and built the monastery. Carrying out the rule of right to the end, he offered up [the revenue from] the inhabitants of the city for the proper maintenance of the establishment.⁴¹

Later on, while describing the immensity of Nālandā, the pilgrim gives

the names of some celebrated men of Nālandā who had kept up the luster of the establishment and continued its guiding work. There were Dharmapāla and Chandrapāla who gave a fragrance to Buddha's teachings, Guṇamati and Sthiramati of excellent reputation among contemporaries, Prabhāmitra of clear argument, and Jinamitra of elevated conversation, Jñānachandra whose perfect excellence was buried in obscurity. All these were men of merit and learning, and authors of several treatises widely known and highly valued by contemporaries.⁴²

It is clear, therefore, that the conversion of Śīlabhadra to Buddhism was more or less a contemporary event—as distinguished from numerous other instances of conversions, which belonged to the past.

There is, however, one case of some interest. Xuanzang mentions a lapse from Buddhism on the part of the people of Sruḡhna.⁴³ He writes: "After the Buddha's decease the people of this country had been led astray to believe in wrong religions and Buddhism had disappeared. Then Śāstra-masters from other lands defeated the Tirthikas and Brahmins in discussions, and the five monasteries already mentioned were built at the places where the discussions were held in order to commemorate the victories."⁴⁴ Thus, although a movement away from Buddhism is admitted here, it is also pointed out that the lost ground was recovered.

It thus seems difficult to attest to Hindu missionary activity even from the account of Xuanzang, notwithstanding its detailed nature and the historical fact that Buddhism seems to have been on the decline during this period. On the other hand, instances of cordial relations between the Hindus and the Buddhists are often met with. The account of Xuanzang's first meeting with Harṣa is itself instructive in this respect. While Xuanzang was studying at Nālandā, he was invited by King Bhāskarvarman to Assam (Kāmarūpa). "Śīlabhadra convinced him that it was also his duty to go to Kāmarūpa on the invitation of its king who was not a Buddhist." Thus, here we have the case of a non-Buddhist king patronizing a Buddhist. In the meantime, King Harṣa decided to hold a great Buddhist assembly at Kanauj:

Hearing of the arrival of the Chinese pilgrim at the court of king Kumāra he sent a summons to the latter to repair to him with his foreign guest. Kumāra replied with a refusal, saying that the king could have his head but not his guest. "I trouble you for your head," came the prompt reply.

Thereupon Kumāra became submissive and proceeded with the pilgrim and a grand retinue to join Śīlāditya. When this sovereign met Yuan-Chuang, our text here relates, having made a polite apology to the pilgrim (literally, having said—I have fatigued you) he made enquiry as to Yuan-Chuang's native land, and the object of his travelling. Yuan-Chuang answered that he was a native of the great T'ang country, and that he was travelling to learn Buddhism.⁴⁵

King Harṣa, who came from a family of sun-worshippers,⁴⁶ treated the Buddhist monk with great respect. The way Harṣa and Bhāskarvarman treated Xuanzang serves to highlight what seems to have been a general atmosphere of cordiality, which characterized the relations between the Hindus and the Buddhists,⁴⁷ even if Xuanzang's account at times must be taken with a grain of salt.⁴⁸

Thus, it is difficult to state that Hinduism was a missionary religion on the basis of Xuanzang's account.

III

The suggestion hitherto has been that Hinduism is not a missionary religion, as it did not display any traits of being one to outside observers. None of these observers, however, *explicitly* stated that the Hindus were not a missionary people; consequently, one had to rely on inference rather than testimony. But *argumentum et silentio* can be a weak reed on which to rest such a major statement about the characteristic features of a religious tradition. The view that Hinduism is not a missionary religion, nevertheless, receives explicit and direct support from the statements made by Albīrūnī (973–1048 AD) in his famous work on India.⁴⁹ Albīrūnī, a contemporary of Maḥmūd of Ghazna, has been widely commended,⁵⁰ and even extolled,⁵¹ for his just portrayal of the Hindus.

In the first chapter of his book, entitled "On the Hindus in General, as an Introduction to our Account of Them," he enumerates the difficulties, which render "it so particularly difficult to penetrate to the essential nature of any Indian subject."⁵² In the course of enumerating these difficulties he remarks:

Secondly, they totally differ from us in religion, as we believe in nothing in which they believe and vice versa. On the whole, there is very little disputing about theological

topics among themselves; at the utmost, they fight with words, but they will never stake their soul or body or their property on religious controversy. On the contrary, all their fanaticism is directed against those who do not belong to them—against all foreigners. They call them *mleccha*, i.e., impure, and forbid having any connection with them, be it by intermarriage or any other kind of relationship, or by sitting, eating, and drinking with them, because thereby, they think, they would be polluted. They consider as impure anything which touches the fire and the water of a foreigner; and no household can exist without these two elements. Besides, they never desire that a thing which once has been polluted should be purified and thus recovered, as, under ordinary circumstances, if anybody or anything has become unclean, he or it would strive to regain the state of purity. They are not allowed to receive anybody who does not belong to them, even if he wished it, or was inclined to their religion. This, too, renders any connection with them quite impossible, and constitutes the widest gulf between us and them.⁵³

Thus, herein we meet with an unequivocal statement that Hindus do not convert others to their religion. What makes the passage interesting is that both the tolerance and the non-missionary nature of Hinduism are referred to simultaneously. This pattern is repeated in the accounts of several outside observers of Hinduism.

In the passage cited above, Albīrūnī can be seen as making not one but two statements about the Hindus: that they do not allow conversion to Hinduism, and that they do not allow reconversion to Hinduism. This second point is singled out for emphasis elsewhere as well, when he writes:

I have repeatedly been told that when Hindu slaves (in Muslim countries) escape and return to their country and religion, the Hindus order that they should fast by way of expiation, then they bury them in the dung, stale, and milk of cows for a certain number of days, till they get into a state of fermentation. Then they drag them out of the dirt and give them similar dirt to eat, and more of the like.

I have asked the Brahmins if this is true, but they deny it, and maintain that there is no expiation possible for

such an individual, and that he is never allowed to return into those conditions of life in which he was before he was carried off as a prisoner. And how should that be possible? If a Brahman eats in the house of a Śūdra for sundry days, he is expelled from his caste and can never regain it.⁵⁴

Thus, the evidence from Albīrūnī further confirms the view that Hinduism was a non-missionary religion.⁵⁵

Another foreign observer of the Indian scene, whose account may shed some light on the nature of Hinduism in medieval times is Ibn Batūtah (1304–1368/1369), who is regarded the most important of the foreign travelers who visited India during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.⁵⁶ Ibn Batūtah, who was born in Tangier and died in Fez, traveled through the Indian subcontinent from 1333 to 1347 AD,⁵⁷ during the reign of Muhammad ibn Tughlaq, one of the more controversial potentates of the Sultanate period.⁵⁸ Ibn Batūtah's account of his stay in India is an invaluable source of information on Hindu attitudes.⁵⁹

It would be difficult to characterize Hinduism as a missionary religion on the basis of Ibn Batūtah's narrative.⁶⁰ The main community at this time toward which such efforts could be directed would be the Muslim community. Ibn Batūtah's account seems to leave little doubt that, whatever else the Hindu attitude towards the Muslims may have been, it was not missionary; if anything, it was hostile (although hostility does not necessarily exclude proselytization as the work of Christian missionaries was to prove later).⁶¹ Islam was already well established in India,⁶² and Ibn Batūtah's account does not suggest that its establishment was challenged by Hindu proselytization. Even when the Hindu attitude to Muslims is not depicted as hostile,⁶³ no effort to convert them to Hinduism is mentioned. Rather, the Muslims were segregated into a separate community. Drawing the picture of Hindu-Muslim relations, based on Ibn Batūtah's account, R.C. Majumdar writes:

The segregation of the Muslim community was rendered necessary, at least to a large extent, by the social rules and habits of the Hindus who regarded the Muslims as unclean and impure (*mlechchhas*). The Hindus maintained no social intercourse with the other community by way of inter-dining and intermarriage. They were uncompromising in this respect, and regarded the touch of Muslims, or even a scent of their food, as pollution. Ibn Batūtah keenly felt all this when he passed through the Hindu States of Malabar, where

Muslims were few and far between. He justly complains that no Hindu would give a vessel to a Muslim for drinking water of a well as he would do to another Hindu. "If one happens to be a Muslim he (Hindu) pours water into his (Muslim's) hands and leaves off when the latter makes him a sign or withdraws. It is the custom among the heathens in the Malabar country that no Muslim should enter their houses or use their vessels for eating purposes. If a Muslim is fed out of their vessels, they either break the vessels, or give them away to the Musalmans" (p. 182). These Hindu ideas of untouchability concerning the Muslims were not confined to Malabar, but extended all over India, and Ibn Batūtah draws refreshing contrast in this respect between the infidels of Ceylon and those of India. The infidels of Ceylon, we are told, were unlike the infidels of India who would neither admit even Muslim fakirs in their houses nor give them food and water in their own utensils (p. xxxiv).⁶⁴

Significantly, R.C. Majumdar concludes his discussion by remarking: "Any one who reads Ibn Batūtah's account would be reminded of what Al-Bīrūnī said regarding the attitude of the Hindus towards the Muslims and vice versa; evidently things had not improved much even after the lapse of three hundred years."⁶⁵ Lest this be regarded as an idiosyncratic conclusion, another scholar reaches a similar conclusion and institutes a similar comparison between Albīrūnī's and Ibn Batūtah's remarks. He too is constrained to remark:

Writing in 1030, before the full tide of conquest had begun, Al-Biruni spoke of how the Hindus differed from the Muslims in every respect, and, because of the raids by Mahmud of Ghazni, cherish the most inveterate aversion toward all Muslims. Nearly three centuries later another traveler, Ibn Battuta, remarked that Hindus and Muslims lived in entirely separate communities. For Hindus, there could be no intermarriage with Muslims nor even inter-dining. "It is the custom among the heathen of the Malabar country," he remarked, "that no Muslim should enter their houses or use their vessels for eating purposes. If a Muslim is fed out of their vessels, they either break the vessels or give them away to the Muslims."⁶⁶

Thus, Ibn Batūtah's account confirms the general impression that Hinduism was a non-missionary religion in medieval times.

The fact that Hinduism was not missionary is further confirmed by what the Portuguese Duarte Barbosa (1500–1521),⁶⁷ has to say about the Vijayanagar Empire, which flourished from the early fourteenth to the early seventeenth century AD in South India.⁶⁸

It is significant that the Vijayanagar Empire was a Hindu empire in the sense that its rulers were Hindus⁶⁹—although the king, according to Barbosa, allowed “such freedom that every man may come and go and live according to his own creed without suffering any annoyance, and without enquiry, whether he is Christian, Jew, Moor or Hindu.”⁷⁰ This meant that, by comparison with North India, which had passed under Muslim rule, the Hindus were not under any political pressure not to convert others to Hinduism, and yet, there does not seem to be any record of any conversion to Hinduism in the accounts of foreign observers of the Vijayanagar empire. It seems that, unlike the Muslims,⁷¹ the Hindu rulers of Vijayanagar did not use their position to encourage or force conversions to Hinduism, even though politically the

success of the early kings was phenomenal. Ibn Batuta, who was in India from 1333 to 1342, states that even in his day a Muhammadan chief on the western coast was subject to Harihara I, whom he calls ‘Haraīb’ or ‘Harīb’ from ‘Hariyappa’ another form of the king’s name; while a hundred years later Abdur Razzāk, envoy from Persia, tells us that the king of Vijayanagar was then lord of all Southern India, from sea to sea and from the Dakhan to Cape Comorin—‘from the frontier of Serendib (Ceylon) to the extremities of the country of Kalbergah. . . His troops amount in number to eleven lak,’ i.e. 1,100,000.⁷²

Yet, there is no evidence that the rulers of Vijayanagar encouraged their Muslim subjects or subordinates to convert to Hinduism.⁷³ Rather, Abdur Razzāk testifies to the religious tolerance of the Vijayanagar kings.⁷⁴ The accounts the Portuguese chronicler Domingo Paes (c 1520–1522) and of Fernao Nuniz, a trader (1535–1537) also do not provide so much as a hint of conversions to Hinduism.⁷⁵

IV

The accounts of the Greek, the Chinese, and the Muslim travellers to India have now been examined, and the overwhelming impression

left by a perusal of these accounts is that Hinduism as a religion was non-missionary. The arrival of Vasco da Gama at Calicut in 1498⁷⁶ led to a restoration of Europe's direct links with India, and several Europeans came to travel through and even reside in India thereafter. The accounts of some of these Europeans have already been referred to, toward the end of the last section. With the passage of time, the connection between India and Europe grew closer, and from the seventeenth century onward, one has the observations and records of several Europeans to draw on. These become even more ample from the eighteenth century onward. It is to an examination of these accounts that we must now turn for whatever light they may shed on the question of whether Hinduism was a missionary religion.

Early English travelers to India have left behind interesting accounts of India, such as those left by Father Thomas Stephens (1579–1619), a Jesuit priest, and Henry Lord, who was the chaplain at the East India Company's factory at Surat around 1630.⁷⁷ Their accounts often refer to such characteristic Hindu practices as *Satī*⁷⁸ and the veneration of the cow,⁷⁹ and sometimes even contain statements of Hindu beliefs,⁸⁰ and, while it is difficult to identify explicit statements to the effect that Hinduism was non-missionary, there is also nothing in them to suggest that it was. If anything, the impression that it is non-missionary religion persists.

Indeed, one begins to wonder on reading the incident with which Thomas Coryat (1612–1617) concludes his account whether even the Moghul emperor himself may not have imbibed the Hindu attitude, or at least had been influenced by it! The incident relates to Jahāngīr, the Moghul emperor, having a man whipped for not preserving his integrity as a Christian! Jahāngīr "bade all men by his example take heed, that seeing he gave liberty to all religions, that which they choose and professe, they may sticke unto."⁸¹

One such European traveler, who has left behind an account of his travels through Moghul India in the seventeenth century, is the French traveler Francois Bernier.⁸² An incident recorded in his book, *Travels in the Moghul Empire (AD 1656–1668)*,⁸³ seems to confirm the view that Hinduism is a non-missionary religion. It takes place as follows. The Hindus say their *sandhyā* prayers thrice, or as Bernier puts it: "The Beths (Vedas) render it obligatory upon every gentile (Hindu) to say his prayers with his face turned to the East thrice in twenty-four hours: in the morning, at noon, and at night."⁸⁴ Bernier goes on to observe that these prayers are to be preceded by ablutions, preferably "in running rather than stagnant water," which he thought was a sound practice for a country with India's climate.

He then goes on to say:

This, however, is found an inconvenient law to those who happen to live in cold countries, and I have met in my travels with some who placed their lives in imminent danger by a strict observance of that law, by plunging into the rivers or tanks within their reach, or if none were sufficiently near, by throwing large pots full of water over their heads. Sometimes I objected to their religion that it contained a law which it would not be possible to observe in cold climates during the winter season, which was, in my mind, a clear proof that it possessed no divine original, but was merely a system of human invention. Their answer was amusing enough. 'We pretend not,' they replied. 'that our law is of universal application. God intended it only for us, and this is the reason why we cannot receive a foreigner into our religion. We do not even say that yours is a false religion: it may be adapted to your wants and circumstances, God having, no doubt, appointed many different ways of going to heaven.' I found it impossible to convince them that the Christian faith was designed for the whole earth, and theirs was mere fable and gross fabrication.⁸⁵

The West, as was mentioned earlier, came into renewed contact with India with the arrival of Vasco da Gama at Calicut in 1498, but this contact between the West and India really became close in the eighteenth century, in the course of the tripartite struggle for the control of India among the British, the French, and the Dutch. And, with the establishment of British Raj in India after the Battle of Plassey (1757), India came into even closer contact with the West through its connection with Britain.

The accounts of Hinduism left by Western—and specially British—travelers, scholars, and Christian missionaries further strengthen the impression that Hinduism is not a missionary religion. In 1758, John Zephaniah Holwell (1711–1779) wrote a tract entitled *The Religious Tenets of the Gentoos*. Therein, he makes two observations, which bear on the subject under discussion. The first is:

It is necessary to remark that the Bramins did not, indeed could not, seek this intercourse, for the principles of their religion forbade their travelling, or mixing with other nations; but so famed were they in the earliest known times

for the purity of their manners, and the sublimity of their wisdom and doctrines, that their converse was sought after, and solicited universally by the philosophers, and searchers after wisdom and truth. For this character of them, we have the concurring testimony of all antiquity.⁸⁶

This is reminiscent of Alexander's encounter, or rather nonencounter with Dandamis, and leaves room for suggesting that even if the Hindus, or more specifically the Brahmins, did not seek to set out on their own to spread their gospel, they were at least willing to share it with those who came to them. But, as soon as we try to pin down the point further and ask, "if, as a result of this audition someone wanted to become a Hindu would he be admitted to the fold?" the answer, it seems, would have to be in the negative. Holwell remarks:

By the fundamental doctrines and laws of the Gentoos, they cannot admit of proselytes or converts, to their faith or worship; not receive them into the pale of their communion, without the loss, of their cast, or tribe; a disgrace, which every Gento would rather suffer death than incur; and although this religious prohibition, in its consequences, reduced the people to a slavish dependence on their Brahmins; yet it proved the cement of their union as a nation; which to this day remains unmixed with any other race of people. These are circumstances which, to the best of our knowledge, remembrance, and reading; peculiarly distinguish the Gentoos, from all the nations of the known world, and plead strongly in favour of the great antiquity of this people, as well as the originality of their scriptures.⁸⁷

The passage is also interesting for connecting the absence of a missionary spirit with the fact of Brahmanical dominance in Hinduism. Alexander Dow (1735/1736–1779) seems to confirm this impression when he writes:

The books which contain the religion and philosophy of the Hindoos, are distinguished by the name of Bedas. They are four in number, and like the sacred writings of other nations, are said to have been penned by the divinity. Beda in the Shanscrita, literally signifies Science; for these books not only treat of religious and moral duties, but of every branch of philosophical knowledge.

The Bedas are, by the Brahmins, held so sacred that they permit no other sect to read them; and such is the influence of superstition and priest-craft over the minds of the other Casts in India, that they would deem it an unpardonable sin to satisfy their curiosity in that respect, were it even within the compass of their power. The Brahmins themselves are bound by such strong ties of religion, to confine those writings to their own tribe, that were any of them known to read them to others, he would be immediately excommunicated. This punishment is worse than even death itself among the Hindoos. The offender is not only thrown down from the noblest order to the most polluted Cast, but his posterity are rendered for ever incapable of being received into his former dignity.⁸⁸

The implication of the above passage for the prospect of Hinduism being a missionary religion is seriously negative for how is a religion to be spread if its fundamental scriptures are concealed, not only from outsiders but also from many of its own adherents? Alexander Dow narrates, in an interesting flash-back, the nature of the problem. He tells us that, when the catholic Akbar (1542–1605), the greatest ruler of the Moghul Dynasty, embarked on his plan to learn about other religions, he had little difficulty in the matter

as almost all religions admit of proselytes, Akbar had good success in his enquiries, till he came to his own subjects the Hindoos. Contrary to the practice of all other religions sects, they admit of no converts, but they allow that every one may go to heaven his own way, though they perhaps suppose, that theirs is the most expeditious method to obtain that important end. They chose rather to make a mystery of their religion, than impose it upon the world, like the Mahomedans, with the sword, or by means of the stake, after the manner of some pious Christians.⁸⁹

It is clear the whole tenor of the account suggests that Alexander Dow did not see Hinduism as a missionary religion at all.

Another observer of the Indian scene in the latter half of the eighteenth century, Nathaniel Brassey Halhead, seems to confirm the non-missionary character of Hinduism from a loftier point of view: "It is indeed an article of faith among the Bramins, that God's all merciful power would not have permitted such a number of different religions, if he had not found a pleasure in beholding their varieties."⁹⁰